

THEORY

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ART AND THE ANIMAL



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Elizabeth A. Grosz is a contemporary feminist theorist whose work deals predominantly with corporeality in relation to aesthetic response. She has published extensively on modern and post-modern French philosophers, and reinterpreted their work through a framework justified by the problematic of the body related to politics, space, and art. She continues to lecture on such topics around the world, and her role in redefining approaches to these ideas, has undoubtedly impacted the transformation of post-modern aesthetic theory.

Art is of the animal. It comes not from something uniquely human – reason, recognition, intelligence, or sensibility – nor from any of man’s higher accomplishments – a special inclination to the aesthetic or the ethical, to beauty or goodness – but from something excessive in the world, from what is unable to be predicted, from the animal. What is most artistic in us is also the most bestial. Art comes from that excess, in the world, in objects, in living things, which enables them to be more than they are, to give more than themselves, their material properties and possible uses, than is readily given in them. Art is the consequence of that excess, that energy or force, that puts life at risk for the sake of intensification, for the sake of sensation itself – not simply for pleasure or for sexuality, as psychoanalysis might suggest – but for what can be magnified, intensified, for what is more, what is perhaps too much, but through which creation, risk, innovation are undertaken for their own sake.

Psychoanalysis has the relations between art and sexuality at least half-right. Art is connected to sexual energies and impulses: they both come from a common impulse for more, what Nietzsche called the will to power. But for psychoanalysis, sexuality transforms itself into art only through representation and the transformation of organ-pleasure into material production: art is the expression of a sublimated sexual impulse, a desexualization of libido.¹ This capacity for displacement, for transferring sexual intensity or libido into desexualized or sublimated creative activities is, for Freud, a uniquely human capacity, the result of the untethering of the drive from a seasonally regulated cyclical sexuality.² It is only the sexual drive, not sexual instincts that can be deflected into non-sexual aims.³

It is not exactly true that art is a consequence of the excesses that sexuality or the sexual drive poses, for it may be that sexuality itself needs to function artistically to be adequately sexual, adequately creative, that sexuality (considered neither drive nor instinct, but the alignment of bodies and their

practices and activities of bodily intensification) itself needs to harness excessiveness and invention to function at all.

There is a connection, a convoluted and oblique relation, between Freudian theory and the understanding of the forces and energies of sexual selection developed in evolutionary theory, especially Darwin's own writings, that is, the attraction to and possible attainment of sexual (though not necessarily copulative) partners⁴ – human and otherwise – and the forces and energies of artistic production and consumption. Art is of the animal to the extent that creation, the attainment of new goals not directly defined through the useful, is at its core.

For Darwin, as opposed to his Spencerian and neo-Darwinian successors who functionalize his work, and who reduce sexual selection to some secretly complex version of natural selection,⁵ the living being is 'artistic' to the extent that its body or products have within them something that attracts, appeals, or entices, not only members of the opposite sex, but also members of the same sex and members of different species. This attraction is largely but certainly not exclusively heterosexual, directed to members of the opposite sex, but it invariably involves some intensification of the body's organs, extremities, covering, head, some magnification and alteration of morphological features according to sexually bifurcated characteristics. Sexual difference, rather than reproductive relations, structures morphological change. Sexual selection does not invariably have a heterosexual object (indeed it is not uncommon for the object of courtship to be either of the same sex, or of a different species, or even an inanimate object). But it does involve some evolutionary transformation of the body according to its status as male or female, some perceptible change in color, in the use of organs, surfaces and extremities, in the development of techniques of display, in skills and abilities that differentiate an organism from those creatures morphologically similar to it with which it competes while attracting the attention or interest of those morphologically dissimilar to it which it attempts to attract. This calling to attention, this making of one's own body into a multi-sensory spectacle involves intensification. Not only are organs on display engorged, intensified, puffed up, but the organs which perceive them – ears, eyes, nose, skin – are also filled with intensity, resonating with colors, sounds, shapes, rhythms.⁶

This may be why Darwin claims some species of salmon,

trout, perch and stickleback change their color during the breeding season, from drab to iridescent and back seasonally, depending on which sex they are.⁷ This is not simply the kind of functional coloring that acts as camouflage to protect fish from predation. Konrad Lorenz has suggested that this spectacular coloring may act as a form of aggression, the vivid and unambiguous defense of territory. For Lorenz, like other Neo-Darwinists, this excess is not in fact excessive: it is the bodily expression of something like a territorial imperative, a key element in the struggle for survival. These beautifully striking and provocative colors, shapes, organs, act, for Lorenz, as territorial markers, posters or placards of possession, markers that function to scare rivals and defend territory. They are rendered functional, all excess and redundancy eliminated.⁸ But for Darwin himself, these markings, which he acknowledges may serve aggressive functions are not the conditions of territoriality but are the raw materials of sexual selection, excesses that are produced and explored for no reason other than their possibilities for intensification.⁹

Many battles between rivalrous males fought apparently over territory are in fact undertaken in Darwin's opinion primarily to attract the attention of females who may otherwise remain indifferent to male display. In the case of battling birds, in many cases the territorial struggle is primarily theatrical, staged, a performance of the body at its most splendid and appealing, rather than a real battle with its attendant risks and dangers: in the case of the bird species, Tetrao umbellus the battles between males "are all a sham, performed to show themselves to the greatest advantage before the admiring females who assemble around; for I have never been able to find a maimed hero, and seldom more than a broken feather." (1981, Book II: 50). Ornamental display occurs in the most successful and aggressive males, and even those males who are most successful at fending off predators and rivals are not always guaranteed to attract the attention of a possible partner. Although beauty of all kinds displays itself, this beauty puts the creature in some kind of potential danger: it has a cost.¹⁰ Nor can the defense of territory in itself be identified with sexual success. Sexual selection imperils as much as it attracts. Territory is only produced when something, some property or quality can be detached from its origin or its predictable function within a regime of natural selection, and made to have a life of its own, to resonate, just for itself. Territory is artistic, the consequence of love not war, of seduction not

defense, of sexual selection not natural selection.

Art is of the animal to the extent that art is fundamentally bound up with the two features that characterize all of animal existence: the force of sexual selection, that is, the vibratory power of seduction (attention, attraction, performance, courtship); and the force of territorialization (the loosening of qualities from the milieu in which they originate and function through the construction of a boundary or frame within which these qualities can exist in different form). Are animals artistic? Certainly, if by that we understand that they intensify sensation (including the sensations of their human observers), that they enjoy this intensification and that it entails a provisional stability such as the constitution of a territory implies. This animal-intensification is artistic even if it is not yet composed, not yet art (it is refrain-like): and further, it provides the marks, the emblems, the very qualities by which a composed art becomes possible. Art is of the animal precisely to the degree that sexuality is artistic.

Art, the excessive composition of material elements that are always more than material, is the major – perhaps the only – way in which living beings deal with and enjoy the intensities that are not contained within but are extracted from the natural world, chaos. Art is where intensity is most at home, where matter is most attenuated without being nullified (perhaps we can understand matter in art as matter at its most dilated, matter as it most closely approximates mind, diastole or proliferation rather than systole and compression (as is usual), and where becoming is most directly in force). Art is where life most readily transforms itself, the zone of indetermination through which all becoming must pass. In this sense, art is not the antithesis of politics but politics continued by other means.¹¹

Art is not a self-contained activity in the sense that it is disconnected from the ways in which the natural and social worlds function. Art, however, is not a window onto these worlds, a mode of their representation or exploration: it does not take the place of social or political analysis or philosophical speculation. Rather, it is where intensities proliferate themselves, where forces are expressed for their own sake, where sensation lives and experiments, where the future is affectively and perceptually anticipated. Art is where properties and qualities – sounds, rhythms, harmonies, in music, colors, forms, relations of surface and depth or visibility

and invisibility in painting, planes, volumes, and voids in architecture and so on – take on the task of representing the future, of preceding and summoning up sensations to come, a people to come, worlds or universes to come. Art is intensely political, not in the sense that it is a collective or community activity (which it may be, but usually is not) but in the sense that it elaborates the possibilities of new, more, sensations than those we know.

Bare survival seems rare in even the most harsh climate and conditions: the more difficult the region, the more ingenuity and artistic-ness is involved in the production of qualities. The thorny Mountain Devil lizard of the western desert in central Australia is capable of survival in even the driest of climates because it is able to live on the water generated only by condensation; yet it does so much more than survive. Not only does it produce the most vivid and striking colors and color-changes, it has also perfected the theatrical arts of stillness and speed. It survives in the most forbidding of conditions, inspiring totemic identifications, serving for many Aboriginal peoples, and through them, perhaps ‘Europeans,’ as an emblem, a Dreaming, of many of their own struggles and triumphs, both daily and historically. It is because there is an animal-becoming, a Devil-becoming, in the co-existence of traditional groups and the thorny lizards in a common terrain where each fights in its own way in the same conditions, that human subjects become inscribed with animal-becomings, the movements, gestures and habits of animal existence (which is not confined to the visual arts but occurs above all in dance and music) and that animals, even lizards, become endowed with human wishes and skills, wisdom, fortitude, cunning, calm, envy, gratitude.

It is this excess, both of harnessable forces, and of unleashed qualities, that enables both art and sex to erupt, at the same evolutionary moment, as a glorification of intensity, as the production and elaboration of intensity for its own sake. While there is a becoming-artistic of the animal world, the emergence of art proper, the eruption of sensation in and for itself is made possible only by this prior animal-becoming, with its own peculiar perhaps even unknowable sexual rituals and pleasures. It is because of the beauty of the thorny mountain devil, its peculiar epidermal geography, its characteristic ways of moving, its color intensifications that it serves to spur on human art making, which does not so much seek to imitate

or represent it as to partake in some of those features and characteristics that allure and attract.

Art is the process of making sensations live, of giving an autonomous existence to expressive qualities and material forms and through them affecting and being affected by life in its other modalities. As songbirds are themselves captivated by a tune sung by its most skilful and melodious rival, and fish are attracted to the most striking colors and movements, even if these are not their own, so these qualities – melody, sonorous expression, color, visual expression – are transferable, the human borrows them from a conscious or long forgotten treasury of earthly and animal excess.

But art is not simply the expression, recognition or celebration of an animal past, a pre-historical allegiance with the forces that make one; it is not memorialization, the confirmation of a shared past, but above all the transformation of the materials from the past into resources for the future, the sensations not available now but to be unleashed in the future on a people now ready to perceive and be affected by them.

Notes

¹ I have outlined Freud's account of art and the special relation he posits between repressed homosexuality and creative sublimation in Grosz, 2001.

² For Freud, sublimation is the capacity for exchanging a sexual for a desexualized aim which

consists in the sexual trend abandoning its aim of obtaining a component or a reproductive pleasure and taking on another which is related genetically to the abandoned one but is itself no longer sexual and must be described as social. We call this process 'sublimation,' in accordance with the general estimate that places social aims higher than sexual ones, which are at bottom self-interested. Sublimation is, incidentally, only a special case in which sexual trends are attached to other, non-sexual ones. (Freud, 1917: 345)

³ The sexual instinct...is probably more strongly developed in man than in most of the higher animals; it is certainly more constant, since it has almost entirely overcome the periodicity to which it is tied in animals. It places extraordinarily large amounts of force at the disposal of civilized activity, and it does this in virtue of its especially marked characteristic of being able to displace its aim without materially diminishing in intensity. This capacity to exchange its originally sexual aim for another one, which is no longer sexual but which is psychically related to the first aim, is called the capacity for *sublimation*. In contrast to this displaceability, in which its value for civilization lies, the sexual instinct may also exhibit a particularly obstinate fixation which renders it unserviceable and which sometimes causes it to degenerate into what are described as abnormalities. (Freud, 1908: 187)

⁴ For Darwin it is quite clear that not all members of any species need to reproduce. There is a high biological tolerance for a percentage of each group not reproducing with no particular detriment for that group, and some advantages:

[S]election has been applied to the family, and not to the individual, for the sake of gaining serviceable ends. Hence we may conclude that slight modification of structure or of instinct, correlated with the sterile condition of certain members of the community, have proved advantageous: consequently the fertile males and females have flourished, and transmitted to their fertile offspring a tendency to produce sterile members with the same modification. (Darwin, 1996: 354)

⁵ I have in mind here the works of some of the most well-known neo-Darwinists, Dennett, Dawkins, E.O. Wilson.

⁶ Alphonso Lingis has spent considerable effort discussing the powerful effects of 'organs to be looked at' which function well beyond the logic of natural selection: the more spectacular fishes often live at depths where either they or their predators are blind or operate through other senses than vision. This makes it clear that there is an excess, left over from or in addition to the needs of survival, a morphological capacity for intensifying bodies and functions that does not operate only or primarily in terms of an external (predatory?) observer:

The color-blind *octopus vulgaris* controls with twenty nervous systems the two to three million chromatophores, iridophores and leucophores fitted in its skin; only fifteen of these have been correlated with camouflage or emotional states. At rest in its lair, its skin invents continuous light shows. The sparked and streaked coral fish school and scatter as a surge of life dominated by a compulsion for exhibition,, spectacle, parade...The most artful blended pigments the deep has to show are inside the shells of abelones [sic], inside the bones of parrotfish, on the backs of living cones, where the very abelones [sic] and parrotfish and cones themselves shall never see them. The most ornate skins are on the nudibrachia, blind sea slugs. In the marine abysses, five or six miles below the last blue rays of the light, the fish and the crabs, almost all of them blind, illuminate their lustrous colors with their own bioluminescence, for no witness. (Lingis, 1984: 8-9)

⁷ Darwin discusses in extensive detail the transformations in coloring in various species, ranging from birds to reptiles and fish, which undergo seasonal color changes that intensify their appeal for the opposite sex. In the case of the stickleback, for example, a fish that can be described as 'beautiful beyond description,' Darwin quotes Warington:

The back and eyes of the female are simply brown, and the belly white. The eyes of the male, on the other hand, are 'of the most splendid green, having a metallic lustre like the green feathers of some humming-birds. The throat and belly are of a bright crimson, the back of an ashy-green, and the whole fish appears as though it were somewhat translucent and glowed with an internal incandescence.' And after the breeding-season these colours all change, the throat and belly become of a pale red, the back more green, and the glowing tints subside.

That with fishes there exists some close relation between their colours and their sexual functions we can clearly see; – firstly, from the adult males of certain species being differently coloured from the females, and often much more brilliantly; – secondly, from these same males, whilst immature, resembling the mature females; – and lastly, from the males, even of those species which at all other times of the year are identical in colour with

the females, often acquiring brilliant tints during the spawning-season. (Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 1981, Book II: 14-15).

- ⁸ Lorenz argues that the four great biological drives – hunger, sex, fear and aggression – must each be understood in terms of natural selection alone. Like other neo-Darwinians, he reduces sexual selection to natural selection, thereby simplifying and rendering evolution mono-directional, regulated only by the selection of randomly acquired characteristics and not by the unpredictable vagaries of taste and pleasure that sexual selection entails.

While inter-species aggression may indeed be linked to questions of species-survival, as Lorenz recognizes, intra-species aggression, which no doubt imperils individual males nevertheless seems to benefit the species to the extent that the strongest male rivals will prevail in the propagation of the next generation. Striking coloring, powerful singing abilities, various ritual behaviours – those I will suggest, following Darwin, which serve sexual selection – are, for Lorenz, substitutes for aggressive behavior and serve to perpetrate its aims. See Lorenz (1966: 14-15), Deleuze and Guattari 's critique of Lorenz's reductionism (1987: 315), Bogue (2003: 57) and Genosko (2002: 48-49).

- ⁹ Darwin argues that although it is possible that the brilliant coloring of fish may serve to protect them from predators, Lorenz's (and Huxley's) claim, It is more likely that it makes them more vulnerable to predators, which tends to affirm their function as sexual lures more than as aggressive placards or banners:

It is possible that certain fishes may have been rendered conspicuous in order to warn birds and beasts of prey (as explained when treating of caterpillars) that they were unpalatable; but it is not, I believe, known that any fish, at least any fresh-water fish, is rejected from being distasteful to fish-devouring animals. (Darwin, 1981, Book II, 17-18)

- ¹⁰ "Even well-armed males, who, it might have been thought, would have altogether depended for success on the law of battle, are in most cases highly ornamented; and their ornaments have been acquired at the expense of some loss of power. In other cases, ornaments have been acquired at the cost of increased risk from birds and beasts of prey." (Darwin, 1981, Book II: 123).
- ¹¹ Deleuze suggests as much in his provocative and rather strange discussion of the work of Gérard Fromanger, that art is politics with affirmation and joy:

It is strange, the way a revolutionary acts because of what he loves in the very world he wishes to destroy. There are no revolutionaries but the joyful, and no politically and aesthetically revolutionary painting without delight. (Deleuze, in Deleuze and Foucault, 1999: 76-77)